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ABSTRACT

This report, the first in the National Center for Early Development & Learning's (NCEDL) "Spotlight" series, is based on a summary of results from a national survey of nearly 3,600 kindergarten teachers by NCEDL. The survey identified teachers' areas of concern regarding transition to school, looked at transition practices, and asked teachers what barriers they see to implementing more transitions practices. Teachers reported that while 52 percent of children experience a successful entry into kindergarten, 48 percent have moderate or serious problems. Teachers were most frequently concerned about children's skills in following directions and academics. The most common practices teachers use to help children as they enter kindergarten are "a talk with parents after school starts," followed by "a letter to parents after the beginning of school" and "an open house after school starts." After summarizing several other results, the report also lists findings on the transition between kindergarten and first grade. The report ends with conclusions and implications of the study, including: (1) there is a poor fit between the expectations of kindergarten teachers and the skills of kindergartners; (2) the nation has a long way to go in ensuring that all children come to school ready to learn; and (3) teachers are talking to teachers about transitions, but teachers are not reaching parents about their children's transitions into first grade. (EV)

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Kindergarten Transitions

Teachers: 48% of Children Have Transition Problems

No. 1 in the NCEDL Spotlight Series

July 1998

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Kindergarten Transitions

Summary of results from a national survey of nearly 3,600 kindergarten teachers by the National Center for Early Development & Learning. This survey identified teachers' areas of concern, looked at transition practices, and asked teachers what barriers they see to implementing more transitions practices. Project directors: Robert Pianta of the University of Virginia and Martha Cox of UNC-Chapel Hill.

No. 1 in the "NCEDL Spotlights" series. July 1998

Teachers: 48% of children have transition problems

Teachers report that while 52 percent of children have a successful entry into kindergarten, 48 percent have moderate or serious problems. Nearly half of the teachers are concerned about many of the children entering kindergarten. Teachers are most frequently concerned about children's skills in following directions and academics. **Here are the percentage of teachers who say that about half of their class or more enter kindergarten with needs in the following areas:**

following directions	**46%**
academic skills	**36%**
home environment	**35%**
working independently	**34%**
formal pre-school experience	**31%**
working in a group	**30%**
immaturity	**20%**
communicating	**14%**

Context variables

Teachers report concerns less frequently in suburban and rural schools than in urban schools; in districts with lower poverty; and in schools with fewer minority students. Less experienced teachers report higher rates of general and specific transition problems.

Teachers' reports of concerns may reflect a mismatch between the competency of children and teachers' expectations. For example, white teachers perceive higher rates of difficulty by children in following directions, problems with social skills and immaturity in high minority composition schools, compared to teachers from other ethnic groups.

Teachers in schools with the greatest needs (higher poverty, more minority students, and urban) rely more heavily on group-oriented practices that occur after the beginning of school, than teachers in other settings.

Transition into kindergarten

The most common practices teachers use to help children as they enter kindergarten are "a talk with parents after school starts," followed by "a letter to parents after the beginning of school" and "an open house after school starts." The least common practice was home visiting, both before and after the beginning of school.

Teachers report that a major barrier to their helping more with children's transitions into kindergarten is that class lists are generated too late. Lists are received, on the average, 15 days before the first day of school.

Another administrative barrier, say teachers, is that some recommended transition practices, such as those involving the parents before school begins, mean working in the summer for no salary. Other barriers include "no transition plan available" and that some transition practices "require too much time."

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Transition into first grade

The survey also looked at the transition between kindergarten and first-grade. Of 11 transition practices listed on the survey, over half of the teachers (57 percent) report having regular meetings with first-grade teachers to discuss continuity in the curriculum between kindergarten and first grade. And over half of the teachers (56 percent) report arranging for their class to visit a first-grade class.

However, less than 25 percent of the teachers report attending transition meetings, sending parents information on how placements in first grade are made, attending meetings to plan transitions for individual children, or planning transition activities for children with special needs. Child-focused transition practices such as having children visit a first-grade classroom or having a first-grade child visit the kindergarten classroom are being used more widely than practices that involve the parents in decisions about who will be their child's first-grade teacher and what the expectations are for first grade.

Other survey results

- 25 percent of membership in kindergarten classrooms change during the course of the academic year.
- 47 percent of public school kindergarten teachers have a master's degree or higher.
- 78 percent of the teachers have a elementary education certification.
- Public school kindergarten teachers have an average of 11.5 years experience teaching kindergarten.
- 23 percent of the teachers said they typically receive information about ways to enhance transitions.
- 25 percent of the teachers say they had some specialized training for children's transition into kindergarten.

Conclusions and implications

- There is a poor fit between the expectations of kindergarten teachers and the skills of kindergartners.
- The nation has a long way to go in ensuring that all children come to school ready to learn, and ensuring that schools make the necessary provisions to reach out to their families.
- School administrators should consider earlier identification and classroom assignment of new students and a formal transition practices plan.
- Teachers are talking to teachers about transitions, but teachers are not reaching parents about their children's transition into first grade.
- Children have little facilitated contact with their future first-grade teacher. Contact is even less frequent in schools with high minority representation and in schools in high poverty areas.
- Kindergarten teachers in the U.S., on average, have many years of teaching experience at the kindergarten level and tend to be well-educated. Teachers need extra assistance and support to facilitate transition. More teachers should receive training in transitions.
- While this survey focused on teachers and classrooms, it is interactions in a larger context that are critical for a child's success during transition. In addition to the individual child's readiness and the kindergarten teacher's role, the family, the education system, preschool programs, and the community are all responsible for successful transitions.

In addition to Cox and Pianta, other authors of papers based on the survey are Diane M. Early and Lorraine C. Taylor, both at UNC-CH, and Sara E. Rimm-Kaufman and Karen M. La Paro, both at the University of Virginia. NCEDL is administratively housed at UNC-CH. This project is supported under the Education Research and Development Centers Program, PR/award number R307A60004, as administered by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. Opinions expressed in these reports do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the National Institute on Early Childhood Development and Education, the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, or the U.S. Department of Education. Permission is granted to reprint this; we ask that you attribute the author(s) of the study and the National Center for Early Development & Learning.

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